

When a grandparent dies: the impact on children and young people

Parents have a great deal to manage when their own parent or carer dies. There is the grief associated with their own loss, but also the reactions and responses of their children to the death of a grandparent.

The death of a grandparent is often a child or young person's first encounter with the death of someone important. Until this point, some children are unaware that people in their life will die and this can be a shock for them. They may have had an awareness at some level, but until it actually happens, they may not be prepared for the reality. Some children will work out that if a grandparent has died, other people may die, resulting in unusually clingy or anxious behaviour. Others may take it all very much in their stride.

Some children may be a bit more prepared, having had a family pet or someone else that they know die. They may recognise some of the behaviours and feelings associated with a death and the rituals we use to say goodbye.

Children look to the adults around them for cues on how to react and respond. First encounters with loss and grief are important life lessons that will influence and shape how children respond in the future. They will decide whether they feel it is OK to talk about death and dying and to show their emotions or perceive it as something better ignored and swept under the carpet. Therefore, it can be good to be honest with your feelings about your parent's death, to show children it is OK to be upset about it, and to also feel different feelings at different times.

If your children understand that you are upset or behaving differently because their grandparent has died, your distress will be less worrying to them. Explaining to them that your reaction is natural gives your children "permission" to show their own sadness, should they need to. Equally, remind them that we are all different. If they don't have the same response as you, or other family members, let them know that is OK too.

The media tends to present a skewed version of death and dying, concentrating on the dramatic and traumatic. This can result in some children being more affected by anxiety about death than they would otherwise have been. It might help to reassure your children if you say that, just like being born, dying is a part of the life cycle. Explain that it is a natural part of growing older:

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'Yes, we are very sad and will miss Granny a lot, but it might help you to remember that we have lots of memories of her. Can you remember when...'

The closeness of the relationship and frequency of contact that grandchildren have had with their grandparents will influence their response. The death of a distant grandparent with whom they have had little contact may be an event that causes little upset and their grief may be short lived. However, children can sometimes seem not to be very affected by the death until attending a family occasion, such as a wedding. They then become aware that someone important is missing, and always will be.

Young people can sometimes not appreciate the special things that grandparents can bring until that grandparent is not around. They also can no longer change anything about their relationship with their grandparent. It may help some young people to write a letter to express what they wished they had said or done when the grandparent was around. In some cases, doing this could also help strengthen the relationship the child has with any grandparents still alive.

In today's world, many grandparents have a key role to play in a child's life, providing childcare for working parents and seeing their grandchildren on a regular basis. Others are their grandchild's main carer, responsible for the child's upbringing. Clearly, the closer the relationship, the more keenly the loss will be felt and for many children and young people today, it can feel like losing a parent.

Steven was eight years old when his much-loved grandmother died. He went in and out of the hospital room several times before saying goodbye. He left a small picture of himself on her pillow to 'take with her'.

Parent of a bereaved child

Adolescents and teenagers often have a stormy relationship with parents and carers. They may therefore appreciate what can be non-judgmental support and unconditional love from grandparents. Ways to communicate online mean that even when geographically far away, a close bond can be formed. Young people may find a deep connection with a family member who can offer a different view of the world from that of a parent. The loss of this special relationship can be very upsetting for them.

When a grandparent dies, it is an opportunity for a family to grieve together. At the same time, it is important to recognise that each person had their own unique and individual relationship with that grandparent, and will therefore experience the loss in their own way.

Although the death of a grandparent can be very hard, it can also be a chance for children to learn that they can handle sad and difficult things in life. This may increase their confidence and resilience to face other challenges in life.

Resources and further reading

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful:

How Children and Young People Grieve
What Helps Grieving Children and Young People
Explaining To Young Children That Someone Has Died
Explaining Funerals, Burial and Cremation to Children

www.childbereavementuk.org

Books to read with children

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

Dear Grandma Bunny: A Miffy Book

Dick Bruna

Miffy's Grandma died last night, and Grandpa Bunny is crying. Using Miffy's experiences, this simple story would help an adult to explain to a very young child why people are sad when someone dies and what happens at a funeral. It includes a basic illustration of a coffin. Suitable for around age 3 years upwards.

Badger's Parting Gifts

Susan Varley

When old Badger dies, his friends think that they will be sad forever. Gradually they are able to remember him with joy and gratitude and to treasure the gifts he left behind for each one of them. For primary school age.

Granpa

John Burningham

This award-winning book is a beautifully written tale about the close and imaginative relationship between a little girl and her Granpa. The last page is an illustration of Granpa's empty chair with the little girl beside it looking very thoughtful. No explanation is offered but his death is implied. This non-directive approach enables the book to be used for a variety of situations.

My Grandma died: A Child's Story about Grief and Loss

Lory Britain

A young child talks about her emotions after her Grandma's death. Includes a list of things to do when someone you love dies.

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.